

HEALTH

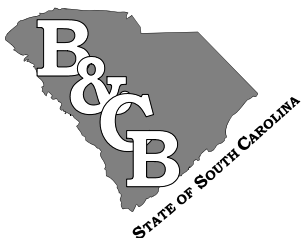
Hemochromatosis

Hemochromatosis, the most common form of iron overload disease, is an inherited disorder that causes the body to absorb and store too much iron. The extra iron builds up in organs and damages them. Without treatment, the disease can cause these organs to fail. Iron is an essential nutrient found in many foods. The greatest amount is found in red meat and iron-fortified bread and cereal. In the body, iron becomes part of hemoglobin, a molecule in the blood that transports oxygen from the lungs to all body tissues. Healthy people usually absorb about 10 percent of the iron contained in the food they eat. People with hemochromatosis absorb about 20 percent. The body has no natural way to rid itself of excess iron, so extra iron is stored in body tissues, especially the liver, heart and pancreas.

Genetic hemochromatosis is mainly associated with a defect in a gene called HFE, which regulates the amount of iron absorbed from food. Hemochromatosis is one of the most common genetic disorders in the United States. It most often affects Caucasians of Northern European descent, although other ethnic groups are also affected. About 5 people in 1,000 of the US Caucasian population carry two copies of the hemochromatosis gene and are susceptible to developing the disease. Hemochromatosis is less common in African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans and American Indians. Men are about five times more likely to be diagnosed with hemochromatosis than women. Men also tend to develop problems from the excess iron at a younger age.

Joint pain is the most common complaint of people with hemochromatosis. Other common symptoms include fatigue, lack of energy, abdominal pain, loss of sex drive and heart problems. Symptoms tend to occur in men between the ages of 30 and 50 and in women over the age 50. However, many people have no symptoms when they are diagnosed. If the disease is not detected early and treated, iron will accumulate in body tissues and may eventually lead to serious problems such as:

- Arthritis
- Liver disease, including enlarged liver, hepatitis, cirrhosis, cancer and liver failure
- Heart abnormalities, such as irregular heart rhythms or congestive heart failure
- Impotence
- Abnormal pigmentation of the skin, the skin looks gray or bronze
- Damage to the pancreas, possibly causing diabetes
- Thyroid deficiency
- Damage to the adrenal gland
- Early menopause



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